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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the education and training of paraeducators to learn how they viewed their role in the instructional process and to explore who held the responsibility for assigning tasks to paraeducators and allocating their time. Researchers surveyed paraeducators who were attending their state or regional paraeducator conferences in the United States, Canada, and England. Most of the respondents were women over age 35 who held a high school diploma. Most were employed in preschool and early elementary grades, and most had served as paraeducators for an average of 7 years. Participants completed surveys that asked for information on: employment, paraeducator duties and areas of instruction, specific elements of the instructional assignment, and training received. Data analysis indicated that paraeducators in all three countries served in the instructional process in all areas of the curriculum and at all age levels, particularly in providing guided practice for students. The data also suggest that paraeducators frequently participated in instructional decision making regarding both how their time was allocated and which aspects of the instructional process they addressed. (Contains 14 references and 5 tables.) (SM)

RUNNING HEAD: PARAEDUCATOR ROLES

Paraeducators: Their Roles in the Instructional Process

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Paraeducators: Their Roles in the Instructional Process

The employment of paraeducators (teacher aides, instructional assistants, paid tutors) has been a practice in U.S. public schools since the end of World War II (Pickett, 1997). Blalock (1991) notes the roles assigned to paraeducators have changed in recent years from "housekeeping" tasks such as sharpening pencils, producing bulletin board displays, and duplicating papers, to assignments of providing instruction and supervision to students.

The term paraeducator is now being used to denote paraprofessional staff who work in the field of education, often employed by special education or Title I programs. The National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Services surveyed chief state school officers and found just over 500,000 FTE (full time equivalent) positions in 1996, up 100,000 from 1990 (Pickett, 1996). This increase reported by State Offices may actually be low, according the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) 1996 estimate of 960,000 'teacher assistants' currently working in schools, a figure which was predicted to increase by 38% by the year 2005.,

Along with the increase in employment, attention is being given to the issues surrounding the employment, training and supervision of paraeducators in education settings (French & Pickett,1998; Pickett, 1997; Salzberg & Morgan, 1995). Concern has been expressed for some time over the lack of preparation for paraeducators and the sporadic nature of the training which may be available to them (Morgan, Hofmeister & Ashbaker, 1995; Pickett, 1986), and this situation apparently still persists. Title I paraeducators were the focus of a recent government report (Chambers, et al.,1999) that found they typically have limited education and are particularly lacking the educational training to teach. The report also noted that Title I paraeducators typically spend 60% of their time providing instruction to students or assisting

teachers in providing instruction. Other research (Morgan, Ashbaker & Roberts, 2000) suggests that these findings are also representative of paraeducators working in regular and special education settings. The 1997 re-authorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997) reads: "A state may allow paraprofessionals who are appropriately trained and supervised under state standards to assist in the provision of special education and related services" [Section 136(f)].

The extensive use of paraeducators (called Learning Support Assistants - LSAs) in United Kingdom schools is also well-documented (e.g. Dew-Hughes, Brayton & Blandford, 1998) and recent changes in UK legislation for supporting students with special educational needs suggest that this trend will continue. The report, *Excellence for All Children* (Department for Education and Employment, 1997) recommended that a national framework be established for training LSAs. The results of Farrell, Balshaw & Polat's (1999) research have lead to recommendations for the management role and training of LSAs. Many Local Education Authorities and individual schools are now beginning to implement their own initiatives (Jerwood, 1999). Thus the daily issues of training and supervision of LSAs are beginning to be addressed at a variety of levels in the education system. However--not unlike the US-- an additional concern relating to the employment of LSAs is emerging: the issues of surrounding the training that is needed by the teachers who are the immediate supervisors of LSA's. This training is needed both by those who are already teaching and by those pre-service teachers who have yet to enter the profession.

Method

The authors conducted a study to investigate the education and training of paraeducators, to learn how paraeducators view their role in the instructional process, and to explore who holds

the responsibility for assigning tasks to paraeducators and allocating their time. Data are reported here from a study which consisted of a survey of paraeducators who were attending their state or regional paraeducator conference. Respondents were attending workshops at their respective conferences, and their participation was voluntary. The surveys were conducted at the Utah State Paraeducator Conference held in Snowbird, Utah (November 1999), at the Calgary Regional Consortium Teacher Assistants' Conference in Calgary, Canada (November 1999), and at the First Annual UK Learning Support Assistants Conference held in Worcester, England (July 2000). A total of 159 surveys were completed: 37 from the US group, 45 from the Canadian group, and 77 from the UK group. The self-report data are described in relation to source of employment and grade level assignments, and instructional decision-making.

Participants

The majority of respondents in each of the groups were female (96% or more), and 67% were over 35 years of age. Most possessed a high school diploma with 41 % of the Canadian group reporting that they had graduated from high school 67% of the US group, and 75% of the United Kingdom group. By contrast, a much larger proportion of the Canadian group (26%) held an Associate Degree, compared with the US (13%) and UK (22%) group; and 28% held a Bachelors Degree, as compared with 13% of the US and 16% of the UK. Table 1 provides details of respondents' schooling and formal qualifications. While none of the UK respondents held a Master's Degree, only small percentages of both US and Canadian respondents did hold advanced degrees. Comparatively more UK paraeducators had obtained teaching certification (33% as compared with 10% US and 12% Canada). Of the UK group 18% also had a Specialist Teaching Assistant qualification, a community college vocational qualification.

Employment Information

The largest employer for the US group was Title I (41.5%) and for the Canadian group, elementary education (39%), although many paraeducators in these groups had more than one employer. See Table 2. In the UK paraeducators are typically employed by individual schools, but 76% stated that they worked with special education students. All grade levels from preschool through grade 12 were represented by respondents but in all three groups, paraeducators typically worked in more than one grade level. The most frequently cited grade levels were grades 3-6 for the US and Canadian groups (41%), whereas the majority of the UK group worked in preschool-grade 2 (59%). The average number of years of experience as a paraeducator ranged from almost 6 (Canada) to almost 10 (UK), with a much narrower range among the Canadian group (1-10 years) than either the US or the UK groups (1-25 and 1-24 respectively).

Paraeducator Duties and Areas of Instruction

Paraeducators were asked to report the percentage of time each day they divide among the duties of instruction, housekeeping and clerical work. For the US and Canadian groups, paraeducators reported that they spent the greatest percentage of their work time instructing students (US, 78% and Canada, 85%) and that the type of instruction most often is in the areas of reading and math. The UK group reported that on average they spent the greatest percentage of work time providing instruction (83%), with the "other" category being designated most frequently, although on average a large proportion of time (66%) was spent teaching either reading, writing or math. See Table 3.

Specific Elements of the Instructional Assignment

Respondents were asked to identify the percentage of time they spent each day among the

following instructional activities; teaching new skills and knowledge, providing practice opportunities in a skill that has already been taught, supervising independent practice of a skill or knowledge, and reviewing work from previous lesson to see what has been retained. For all three groups the instructional component on which respondents spent the most time was providing guided practice: US, 33%; Canada, 33%; UK, 30%. See Table 4.

In all three groups the classroom teachers were the people most often responsible for allocating the paraeducators' work time: US, 42%; Canada, 35%; UK, 66% See Table 5. The next most frequently responsible group was the paraeducators themselves. The persons most often responsible for allocating the paraeducator's time to specific elements of the instructional process were classroom teachers: US, 56%; Canada, 45%; UK, 57%. In many cases, respondents reported that the decision was made jointly by the teacher and paraeducator. In all three groups, on average respondents spent the majority of their time working with a teacher present: US, 74%; Canada, 58%; UK, 68%.

Training Received

A final question on the survey asked whether respondents had received training prior to the conference they were then attending. Of the US group, 90% stated that they had received training, although no details were given; of the Canadian group, 54% had received training, as had 80% of the UK group. The latter two groups provided some details, revealing that training ranged from short workshops to college classes, the majority being provided by school districts or community colleges/universities.

Discussion

Data are reported from respondents who were attending workshops at their respective state or regional conferences. Participation was voluntary. The vast majority were women who were age 36 or older, and who held a high school diploma. Most were employed in pre-school and early elementary grades. Interestingly, although the range was from 1 year to 24 or 25 years in the UK and the US, most had served as a paraeducator on average 7 years.

These data confirm that paraeducators in the US, Canada, and the UK serve in the instructional process in all areas of the curriculum, at all age levels, particularly in providing guided practice for students. Data also suggest that paraeducators frequently participate in instructional decision-making, regarding both how their time is allocated and which aspects of the instructional process they address.

Conclusion

Given that this group of respondents largely represented mature women who had been on the job for a number of years, and who were actively involved in the instructional process, it would be expected that they would receive large amounts of training for the effective performance of their jobs. Typically, a high school diploma does not prepare teachers of students, particularly students who are in special education, or who are at risk of school failure.

Although many of the respondents had received some form of training prior to the conference at which they completed the questionnaire, training opportunities cited consisted largely of off-site, externally provided training rather than on-the-job professional development. Whether or not training was offered but not accessed was not explored. However, all paraeducators should be well-trained if they are to provide instruction in the classroom.

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Table 1.

Gender, Age, and Education

Group	n	Female	Age				Diploma/Degree			
			<26	26-35	36-45	>45	High School	Assoc.	Bach.	Mast.
US	37	97	0	10	45	45	67	13	13	7
Canada	45	96	9	24	36	31	41	26	28	5
UK	77	97	3	17	51	26	75	(22)	16	

Gender, age, and education reported in percentages.

Note. Where percentages do not add up to 100%, this denotes non-responses.

Table 2.

Employers, Grade levels, and Years on the Job

Group	Employer				Grade Levels			Years as a paraeducator	
	Elem. Ed.	Sec. Ed.	Special Ed.	Other	Preschool-grade 2	3-6	7-12	mean	range
US	40	41	19	44	34	5	17	7.8	1-25
Canada	25	41	34	24	39	11	26	5.8	1-10
UK	59	45	31	24*			76*	9.7	1-24

* Working with these populations.

Table 3.

Duties and Areas of Instruction*

Group	Proportion of time spent in the following activities			Areas of Instruction Taught				
	Instruction	House-keeping	Clerical	Reading	Math	Lang. Arts	Self-help/ Life skills	Other
US	78	9	13	43	27	6	10	14
Canada	85	6	9	25	28	22	14	11
UK	83	7	10	22	22	22		34

*overall average percentage.

Table 4.

Time spent in specific elements of the instructional process*

	US	Canada	UK
Teaching new skills & knowledge	23	23	29
Providing practice opportunities	33	33	30
Supervising independent practice of a skill/knowledge	25	26	25
Reviewing previous lessons for retention	19	18	16

*overall average percentage

Table 5.

Who decides the paraeducator's time allocations?

Group	Who decided how the paraeducator's work time is allocated			Who decides how the time is divided among specific elements of the instructional process		
	US	Canada	UK	US	Canada	UK
Paraeducator	22	34	33	16	38	38
Class teacher(s)	41	35	66	56	45	68
Students' IEP	20	4	23	4	0	20
Other Supervisor	2	10		4	0	11
Administrator	10	9	25	0	10	10
Other	5	8	29	22	7	16

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